

Mary Harper, Board of Directors

Friends of Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge

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Testimony

Before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife , Oceans & Insular Affairs Concerning the Reauthorization of Volunteer and Community Partnership Programs for the National Wildlife Refuge System

April 25, 2013

Chairman Fleming, Ranking Member Sablan and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Mary Harper and I thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HR 1300, reauthorization of volunteer and community partnership programs of the National Wildlife Refuge System through 2018. I offer this testimony on behalf of the Friends of Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) where I currently serve as the Secretary of the Board of Directors, and the National Wildlife Refuge Association and its nearly 200 affiliated refuge Friends organizations nationwide.

The Friends of Forsythe NWR is the support group for Edwin B. Forsythe NWR which spans three counties in New Jersey. In my testimony, I will describe my experience with volunteers at our refuge, the volunteer program of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) and the contributions of volunteers to both "my" refuge and the NWRS. Nationwide, volunteers provide approximately 20% of all the work conducted on national wildlife refuges – the equivalent of 749 full time employees. At our refuge, volunteers contribute the equivalent of 7 full time employees.

I have been a volunteer at Forsythe since 2008. During this time, I've met and worked with hundreds of other volunteers, done hundreds of hours of field work with Refuge Biologists, led many interpretive tours and nature walks, staffed the Nature Store at our Visitor Information Center, entered 20 years worth of wildlife data into an international database, represented our Friends group at community events, and taught dozens of Environmental Education classes at the refuge. I have found these tasks to be challenging, engaging and fun. I've found our volunteers to be dedicated, skillful, well-trained and always supportive. Last year, I had the good fortune to be chosen to attend Friends Academy at the National Conservation Training Center and was able to spend a week with volunteers and refuge managers from all over the country. It was an once-in-a-lifetime experience. I discovered that the same volunteer attributes - dedicated, skillful, well-trained and always supportive - seem to be a national phenomenon.

Dr. Edgar Bristow, President Emeritus and Founder of our Friends group, offered testimony before this committee in 2003 supporting passage of HR 2408 and described the contributions of Friends and volunteers so I will focus on the efforts at the Refuge since 2003.

Edwin B. Forsythe NWR hosts 250,000 visitors a year with 100,000 of them utilizing our internationally famous Wildlife Drive, an 8 mile loop road. In 2003, the only visitor contact points on the refuge were an outdoor brochure rack and a shack serving as a nature store staffed by volunteers on weekends only in Spring and Fall. Thanks to funding from USFWS, a beautiful Visitor Information Center (VIC) was constructed and opened in 2011. It is open to the public seven days a week (closed on three holidays annually) and it is entirely staffed by Friends and volunteers. An outstanding exhibit area was added with funding from USFWS and opened, despite SuperStorm Sandy, in February, 2013. Volunteers

and Friends assisted with the design and installation of exhibits throughout the project and a member of Friends of Forsythe provided funding for the Salt Marsh exhibit.

As you may know, our Wildlife Drive suffered severe damage in SuperStorm Sandy which created 17 breaches and huge holes in the roadway. Thanks to the Federal Highways Emergency Fund, repairs have been nearly completed and 350 people came into the VIC the first weekend that the drive was re-opened. One of the main attractions in the VIC is our brand new live stream Osprey camera. The camera and monitor were made possible and installed through a joint partnership involving the Refuge, Friends, and the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey. The camera was conceptualized by a Conserve Wildlife staffer and one of our Friends. The entire cost of the equipment and installation was shared by Friends of Forsythe and Conserve Wildlife NJ. The live stream is accessible 24 hours a day via the Internet on www.friendsofforsythe.org/osprey-cam. The ospreys are currently in the process of laying eggs and the public will be able to follow their lifecycle all the way to fledging of this year's chicks.

The nest itself can be viewed in person at the Refuge from Leeds Eco-trail boardwalk. The walk is constructed of recycled plastic planks which can be inscribed with memorials for a donation to Friends of Forsythe. Memorial donations have been used to install stationary binoculars for adults, children and people in wheelchairs and also install a display describing the osprey lifecycle. The Memorial Plank program is a 100% volunteer activity.

Once Wildlife Drive is officially re-opened for daily use on May 18, visitors will be able to tour it aboard our new electric tram, a gift to the Friends of Forsythe from one of our members. The drivers and interpreters for tram tours will be Friends and volunteers. Twenty Friends have already volunteered for regular duties. This will cut down on traffic on the Drive and give visitors a chance to really learn about the habitat and wildlife.

Our Refuge is much more than just Wildlife Drive. It encompasses 47,000 acres of coastal New Jersey and activities go on all year. These include biological surveys, community outreach events, environmental education activities, and coastal research. Volunteers and Friends support and staff as much of the work of the Refuge as is allowed by USFWS regulations. Last year, the Environmental Education Committee, under the guidance of Visitor Services Coordinator Don Friday, educated 3,324 children at the Refuge and in classrooms in two of our three counties. Volunteers have provided the Urban Birds program to children in under-served urban classrooms for the past four years, taught nature classes, judged science fairs, and annually participate in Read Across America. The volunteers and Friends also engaged 8,289 adults and children in interpretation activities through Bird Walks, tours and other nature-based activities including hosting several groups of home-schoolers on a weekly basis. The Refuge Visitor Services Coordinator also serves as the liaison for the 275 members of Friends of Forsythe.

One of our most popular new programs, the Family Archery Program, is an 8 week course in archery and basic outdoor skills. The course is taught by volunteers who have completed archery instructor training and are certified. The class is open to children 6-14 and their families and is offered twice a year. It is a 100% volunteer-run program.

Friends of Forsythe sponsors an annual Hooked on Fishing, Not on Drugs fishing derby which attracts 150-300 children each year. Our 10th derby is scheduled for May 11th. Co-sponsors include Galloway Township, Atlantic County Federation of Sportsmen's Club, Absecon Saltwater Sportsmen, Galloway Township and the Noyes Museum of Stockton College. Atlantic County Sheriff's Department D.A.R.E. Officers are also participating this year.

Friends of Forsythe, volunteers and the Refuge co-sponsor a number of other annual events and celebrations including Make-A-Difference Day, National Public Lands Day, and International Migratory Bird Day which usually begin with a clean-up of our Oceanville site in partnership with the community of Galloway Township, NJ.

In order to keep our roles of qualified Friends and volunteers full, the refuge, volunteers, Friends and The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey have partnered to annually offer a Volunteer Master Naturalist class at Refuge headquarters. Classes meet twice a week for nine weeks, are taught by Stockton faculty and refuge staff and include field work and hands-on learning. Certification is earned by 20-30 people annually and many of them become Refuge volunteers.

Our Volunteer Coordinator, Sandy Perchetti, gracefully coordinates and facilitates all of these activities. A few years ago, Sandy visited The Arbor Day Tree Farm and was inspired by their Children's Nature Discovery Area. She began talking about it with Friends, volunteers and a few Eagle Scouts. Our own Children's Nature Discovery Area was opened almost three years ago and is in constant use by families with young children. Sandy coordinates an army of 1,482 annual volunteers with a core group of 175 very active participants. This volunteer group logged 14,013 hours in 2012, the equivalent of 7 full-time employees. Sandy Perchetti now also serves as the Volunteer Coordinator for the Service's Northeast Region.

Our Refuge Manager, Virginia Rettig, has been faced with enormous challenges since coming to Forsythe two years ago. She has presided over the opening of the new Visitor Information Center, the installation and opening of our new exhibits and, for the past six months, the SuperStorm Sandy recovery efforts. Through all this, Virginia has faithfully attended our monthly Friends of Forsythe meetings and kept us informed about refuge activities and needs. Right now, we need to complete our storm recovery work. Right now, we need to complete our storm recovery work. We cannot thank Congress enough for providing us with this essential assistance and we are eager to get to work on the bulk of our recovery work as soon as all plans are finalized and approved by the Office of Management and Budget. Our refuge was greatly impacted by the storm as were our neighboring communities, especially communities in Ocean County and the now-famous Brick Township and Mantoloking where we have three refuge sites in dire need of debris removal and other recovery efforts. Our Refuge Manager and volunteers stand ready stand ready to do the job and are only awaiting the arrival of needed funding.

What I have reported so far has been related to the work of volunteers, Friends, and one Volunteer Coordinator on one of 560 National Wildlife Refuges. Most of the other refuges has its own volunteer group and its own story. Nationally, 39,000 volunteers contribute 1.4 million hours to our refuges. This is equivalent to 749 full-time employees. At Friends Academy, I met 24 other Friends Board members and many refuge managers and deputy managers and found their stories to be similar to ours. As funding for USFWS and NWRS dips, Friends and volunteers step into the gaps because our public lands and natural history and heritage matter to us – but there is only so much we can do. These lands and waters matter enough for thousands of us to work tirelessly to keep them open and available to the American people. We support the activities allowed on refuges: hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, photography, interpretation, hiking and biking where appropriate. These things are part of American life. National Wildlife Refuges support our local economies and serve as classrooms for our children in addition to their primary purpose of providing habitat for wildlife. Volunteer Coordinators are essential to our volunteer programs. These are the reasons I am speaking to you in support of HR 1300.